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ABSTRACT

Decision-making in reading instruction can be made by the classroom teacher or through scripted materials, such as teacher manuals. Teachers have undergone schooling and certification, and thus are qualified to make decisions concerning objectives of the curriculum, learning opportunities for students, and assessment methods. Programmed reading materials can provide teachers with ideas for decision-making. Individualized instruction lacks a textbook, and thus library books make good reading materials for this instruction. Other unscripted means of teaching reading are the experience chart approach and enlarged books for shared reading. The discussion of teaching styles raises a number of other issues, such as state-mandated objectives and testing; outside school learning activities; learning styles theory; and philosophies of education. (PM)

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Reading Instruction: Decision Making By the Teacher.

by Marlow Ediger

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READING INSTRUCTION: DECISION MAKING BY THE TEACHER

Should decisions in reading instruction be made by the classroom teacher or should scripted materials be used whereby decision making is largely done by the writers of the manual used in teaching? These two philosophies of instruction appear to be at somewhat opposite ends of the continuum. Each procedure will be analyzed in determining the reading curriculum.

Decision Making by the Reading Teacher

The properly certified, licensed teacher has received four (BSE) or five years (MAT) of course work to become a professional teacher. He/she should have had course work in general education as well as in methods of instruction to teach pupils. When teachers are the appropriate persons to make reading curricular decisions, they make a plethora of choices pertaining to the following:

1. objectives of reading instruction on a daily basis. Their implementation is modified when the teacher receives continuous feedback from individual readers. The lesson plan is not carved in stone, but subject to change and revision as pupil needs are conveyed to the teacher. Pupils are individuals and these differences help to determine what is needed by the learner at a given time.
2. the learning opportunities to achieve stated objectives are chosen on the basis of the individual learner, even though pupils may be taught in large group instruction, committees, or individually. The teacher observes and notices what each pupil needs as the reading lesson progresses. There may be similar needs for teaching the entire classroom or for a committee of four or five pupils. It might well be that one pupil needs certain kinds of assistance which others do not need.
3. evaluation procedures are used continuously to provide feedback for the making of changes in the lesson plan.The evaluation technique used is based upon what is being assessed. Each evaluation technique is unique to the involved situation. Sometimes teacher observation is adequate to notice sequential needs of learners in reading. At other times, journal writing may be used since the observations made need recording for study and remembrance. In all cases, the teacher receives vital information to guide pupils in making sequential progress (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Six).

Degrees Involved in Decision Making

Programmed reading is a very highly structured procedure in instruction be it through teacher decision making or through pupil choices of what to read. A true programmed approach might well move forward very slowly from the less to the gradually increased level of complexity. Once the desired level of reading achievement is found, the reader may learn independently from programmed reading in either textbook or computerized form. For example, the pupil reads a very short section of a few lines, responds to a multiple choice test item covering what was read, and then checks his/her answer with that given by the programmer. If correct, the pupil is ready to read the next sequential item of a few lines, respond to a multiple choice test item covering what was taught, and then compares his/her answer with the correct one provided by the programmer. If incorrect, the pupil now knows the correct answer and is also reading for the next programed item. This routine may be repeated over and over again with no exceptions. The pupil in a quality program gives almost no incorrect answers. Generally a well tested program used by the pupil at his/her instructional level will be correct approximately 95% of the time in responses made. The author observed pupils in an Ottumwa, Iowa elementary school using programmed textbooks. These pupils basically asked for no help from the teacher since the responses each made were very frequently correct. The previously completed programmed item provided background experiences for the new sequence in programmed items encountered. Thus, pupils could work quite independently in programmed reading. Teachers did need to provide the programmed textbook which was on the instructional level of the child. Programmed reading, as described, did not ask for pupil input in terms of identifying questions and problems, nor did it invite any teacher comments or criticisms.

Quality programmed materials are pilot tested which have taken kinks out of the reading programs. This formal program of reading instruction lacks what can be called a manual to provide objectives, learning opportunities, and assessment procedures for teaching and learning situations. It is not scripted in terms of having formal, rigid methods of instruction for teachers to follow.

Second, with the use of a carefully chosen basal reader, the teacher may use the manual section in a formal manner. He/she may use the objectives, learning opportunities, and evaluation

procedures as they are given by the writers of the basal. Many decisions are then made for the teacher. A highly scripted reading program is then in evidence. However, the reading teacher might adapt suggestions as given in the manual with his/her own philosophy of reading instruction. Thus, in degrees, the teacher may move away from the rigid conformity of the manual to a more creative, open ended approach. When an open ended approach is used, the teacher increasingly engages in decision making responsibilities.

The author when supervising student teachers in the public schools has observed both cooperating teachers and student teachers use the basal in a highly formal manner, with the manual serving in providing precise directions for teaching. The approach used then was highly scripted. At other times, the student teachers/cooperating teachers used the manual in very flexible, open ended approach. At times, it appeared that the manual had no influence over the methods of teaching used by the teacher(s). Story content here represented critical and creative thinking, as well as problem solving strategies.

Third, individualized reading approaches possess no manual for instructional purposes. Instead of basals, library books are used in the individualized reading program. A variety of titles/genres of books need to be available for pupil choice to read. These books need to be on diverse levels of reading achievement so that the reader may select sequential books to read on his/her reading level. The teacher steps in when a pupil cannot make a choice as to what to read. Otherwise, the pupil is the chooser. After completing reading a library book, the pupil has a conference with the teacher. The pupil and the teacher discuss contents in the library book read by the former. Also, the pupil might read a short selection aloud to check on reading fluency. The total program of instruction is unscripted and does not tell what or how to teach reading.

Fourth, the experience chart approach in reading instruction is totally unscripted. There is no manual for the teacher to even attempt to follow. In the experience chart approach, the teacher may place selected objects on an interest center. Pupils my look at and discuss these objects. Then, pupils tell what they have experienced from the objects. The reading teacher records the resulting ideas on a chart with neat manuscript letters. After the experience chart of six to seven lines has been completed, the teacher may point to each word as the total class reads the contents. The experience chart may be reread as often as desired. This is indeed a very open-ended procedure in teaching reading.

Fifth, the Big Book may be used to teach reading. The enlarged book must be clearly visible to a group of seven or eight pupils being taught. The teacher builds background information by having pupils view the illustrations in each large page. This stimulates interest in reading and helps pupils to recognize words when reading aloud together. The teacher reads aloud the first page as he/she points to each word read. The pupils can notice each word pointed to and pronounced. Next, pupils read along with the teacher, orally. Rereading may be done as often as desired. The teacher determines the stories to be read with children together with the sequence of instruction. There are no scripted materials to follow in teaching and learning.

Sixth, systematic phonics is a philosophy of instruction which many believe in for the teaching of reading. A systematic phonics emphasis stresses that pupils master basic sound/symbol relationships before reading story content. Phonics has been taught along with reading for meaning such as in the basal reading program. The scope and sequence of instruction in systematic phonics approaches would be grapheme/phoneme relationships in ascending order of perceived difficulty. With a strong emphasis upon phonics instruction, pupils should become proficient in sounding out words to identify the unknown. Scripted materials for teacher use might be heavily construed so that teachers say the right things in teaching and learning situations. The former Distar program of reading instruction was heavily scripted so that the teacher could read orally from the manual as to what pupils were to do in each step of learning phonics. Reading directly, orally, from the manual what pupils were to learn and do was inherent in Distar. Pupils here who had difficulty in reading were taught in groups of seven to eight (See Krashen, 2002).

Issues in Reading Instruction

There are numerous issues inherent in the reading curriculum. Generally, whole language versus phonics instruction has predominated. Whole language approaches are based on the thinking that when pupils read, they are to read ideas in their totality. Reading of interesting ideas is perceived to stimulate learning in order to do more reading. With the reading of ideas in holism, pupils tend to learn to recognize new words. Even here, a small amount of phonics is brought in as needed to encourage independence in word recognition. Holism in the reading curriculum may be contrasted with a part to whole

emphasis. The latter stresses starting with vital sound/symbol relationships which pupils need to develop and then incorporating reading for ideas. Selected teachers may bring in holism sooner that others. Holism and part to whole methods of reading instruction may also occur simultaneously.

Holism in reading instruction includes individualized reading, experience charts, and the Big Book procedure. Part to whole methods includes programmed reading, systematic phonics. and Distar. Basal readers could come in either camp be it holism or part to whole methods depending upon the beliefs of the individual teacher.

A second issue pertains to scripted versus unscripted materials for teacher use in teaching pupils. There are no manuals or scripted materials when individualized reading, the experience chart, and the Big Book methods of reading instruction are used. The teacher can indeed be highly creative in the teaching of reading when using these procedures of instruction. Highly scripted materials of reading instruction for teachers to use include systematic phonics and the Distar program. Basically, Distar emphasized a teacher proof approach in reading instruction. The section in the teacher's can be read aloud, as is, in teaching pupils. Programmed reading is unscripted, as a whole, but very carefully sequenced so that pupils individually may work at their very own unique rate of speed without teacher assistance. Built in sequence for success, through field testing, had made for popularity of its programs of instruction by selected teachers in textbook or computerized programs.

Third, state mandated objectives and testing has certainly become important in reading instruction. The objectives are developed and written on the state, not local level of instruction. They are available for teacher use to set benchmarks for reading instruction. Reading teachers then need to align learning opportunities in reading with the state mandated objectives of instruction. Statewide testing in reading is to include grades three thorough eight. If pupils fail a test, they may need to take that failed grade level over again. How this will evolve is yet to be seen. These objectives and tests have been developed away from the local classroom setting, such as at the state department of education level. They tend to include phonics and holism in their stated objectives. Objectives developed locally for reading instruction include, individualized reading, the experience chart, and the Big Book approach. Systematic phonics procedures are developed by leading textbook companies generally and may be highly scripted. All states will

be implementing state mandated objectives in reading instruction by the 2005-2006 school year. Much is written about high stakes testing whereby a high school student may be denied a diploma if he/she does not pass the state mandated exit test.

Fourth, before and after school tutoring, as well as summer school, is available for more pupils than formerly. There are chances here to make up for deficiencies in learning to read. A concern here may be that a pupil gets too much of a good thing like reading instruction, with a lack of time for recreation and rest. All pupils should have opportunities to attend summer school if desired. It should not only be available for those not doing well during the regular school year, but for all pupils who wish to attend. Many children today do not know what to do with all the available time during the summer months. It certainly would be good for all pupils to have access to summer school with a rich offering of curricular experiences. Reading programs for each pupil should be chosen based on the needs of the learner rather than holism versus phonics. Perhaps, a balanced approach between these two procedures should be in the offing also.

Fifth, learning styles theory needs to be carefully considered when choosing a reading curriculum for pupils. There are selected pupils who learn best by the self in learning to read, whereas others need to work in collaborative situations. A balance between the two approaches would work well also. There are pupils who individually learn to read best such as in individualized reading, whereas others learn best in collaboration with others such as in peer teaching. Pupils individually do possess a style of learning which is different from others and this needs adequate consideration (See Searson and Dunn, 2001).

Sixth, pupils have different intelligences when revealing what has been learned from reading. Thus a pupil may indicate content read using artistic intelligences such as drawing a picture of that which was comprehended. Or with the use of physical prowess make a construction project to reveal learnings acquired. Garner (1993) identified eight intelligences possessed by pupils individually which they may use to indicate what was learned.

Seventh, educational psychologies used in teaching reading vary from program to program. Stimulus- Response Theory of learning is emphasized in programmed reading. Each stimulus (the short selection read) is followed with a response which needs to be made by pupils individually (such is in

answering a multiple choice test item covering subject matter read). Individualized reading stresses gestalt psychology in that the pupil reads an entire library book before discussing questions covering content completed in reading (Ediger, 2001, 22- 26).

Eighth, different philosophies of instruction are inherent in reading. Perennialism emphasizes pupils reading the classics, not recent materials published. Classical literature has stood the test of time in importance such as the works of William Shakespeare, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, among others. Classical literature is advocated by perennialists as a philosophy of reading instruction with its enduring ideas presented. The teacher selects classical literature for pupils to read and discuss. The discussions are very exciting and thoroughly Socratic in nature with no lecture. Stimulating discussions lead pupils in wanting to read more without compulsion to do so. Perennialism is past orientated and stresses stability- the continuity of the Great Ideas - over change. The abiding truths reside within the world's greatest minds. The overall goal of education is to identify, preserve, and transmit essential truth. More specifically the goal is to teach students how to think and to transmit the best ideas, the enduring wisdom of the past (O'Neill, 1981).

When pupils read expository materials, they read subject matter which leads to problem solving. Problem solving emphasizes experimentalism as a philosophy of education. Thus, from an overview of the expository library book, pupils identify a problem. The problem represents a dilemma and takes time to solve. Information is gathered in answer to the identified problem. A tentative hypothesis is then developed which is subject to evaluation. The hypothesis may then need to be modified or left as is (Dewey, 1916).

Ninth, assessment approaches may be varied depending upon the kinds of situations involved. State mandated tests may be either criterion referenced tests (CRTs) or standardized norm referenced tests. The pupil receives a numerical result from having taken the test. The tests given generally have multiple choice test items and can readily be machine scored. A printout not only provides the pupil's percentile rank, but also the school's as well as the system's average achievement. When the school's or school system's results are published in the media, a report card results, which communicates to parents and the lay public how well a school is doing in pupil achievement. Toward the other end of the continuum, a pupil with teacher guidance may also develop a portfolio to show

achievement and progress.

Tenth, research results may provide some answers to problems in the teaching of reading. But suppose from a research study pupils in Method A reading instruction program do better at the .05 level of significance as compared to Method B. Method A is the new approach whereas Method B pupils have a traditional procedure in reading instruction. Should all schools then change to Method A? The answer would be "No." External validity might be lacking since the schools we teach in may have quite different circumstances such as more ESL pupils, lack computerized materials and programs larger number of pupils per classroom, and outdated textbooks, all of which Method A pupils experienced, Then too, research studies are based on averages, but classroom teaching stresses teaching individual pupils in terms of needs possessed.

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